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## What Is Emergen-C and Does It Actually Work?

At the first sign of sickness, your instinct may be to consume as much Emergen-C as possible. Here's the scoop on whether it can actually help boost your immune system.

By Gabrielle Kassel | Dec 18, 2018



Photo: NBC / Contributor / Getty Images

Chances are, your parents' go-to move is pouring a big ol' glass of orange juice at the first sign of sniffles, while waxing poetic about vitamin C. With the belief that loading up on vitamin C is a surefire way to beat any bug, all now-adult millennials are guzzling its modern-day derivative: Emergen-C.

But what exactly is Emergen-C? And can it actually help you not get sick or get over your cold quicker? Here, experts dish everything you need to know.

### What Is Emergen-C anyway?

For the uninitiated, Emergen-C is a brand of powdered vitamin supplements that you stir into water to drink. In recent years, they've released a Probiotic Plus blend, an Energy formula, and a Sleep supplement—but the brand's OG product is Immune Support. (If you've never seen the insides of an Immune Support packet, it looks like the contents of orange Pixy Stix. When added to water, it tastes like fizzy, healthified orange soda).



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As its name suggests, the hero-ingredient of Emergen-C Immune Support is vitamin C; each serving contains a whopping 1,000 mg, which is 1,667 percent of your recommended daily allowance (RDA). Beyond that, "the ingredients of Emergen-C are actually quite basic: a blend of vitamins, some electrolytes along with some sugar, artificial sweetener, and coloring," says **Elroy Vojdani, M.D.**, founder of Regenera Medical and a certified functional medicine practitioner.

The additional blend of vitamins in one serving of Emergen-C includes 10mg of vitamin B<sub>6</sub>, 25mcg of vitamin B<sub>12</sub>, 100mcg of vitamin B<sub>9</sub>, 0.5mcg of manganese (25 percent of your RDA), and 2mg of zinc. Plus, smaller amounts of phosphorus, folic acid, calcium, phosphorus, chromium, sodium, potassium, and other B vitamins.

Does Emergen-C work?

There are no product-specific studies on Emergen-C or its effectiveness in preventing or curing the common cold. However, experts say that research looking at the specific ingredients in Emergen-C (mainly vitamin C and zinc) can help answer that question. (P.S. here are 10 easy ways to boost your immunity).

There's been a ton of research done on the role of vitamin C in immune health—and, alas, the findings aren't super conclusive. For instance, a 2013 review found that taking vitamin C supplements regularly had no effect on whether or not the general population got a cold, but that the nutrient may be beneficial for extreme exercisers and people with physically strenuous jobs. (FYI: Your high-intensity workouts may be compromising your immune system.) Another study published in the *European Journal of Clinical Nutrition* found that taking a daily vitamin C supplement may reduce the frequency of catching a cold, but did not reduce the duration or severity of that cold.

So, while it may help keep you from getting sick, the common belief that ramping up your vitamin C intake can help you get over a cold faster is a myth.

That said, Dr. Vojdani says it's still important to meet your recommended daily intake of vitamin C. "Vitamin C has been proven to help protect the body, and several cells of the immune system need vitamin C to perform their task and defend us against sickness." Translation: Getting enough vitamin C is important, but getting 10 times the RDA isn't going to magically make your immune system unstoppable.

What about the other ingredients in Emergen-C? One 2017 review linked zinc to faster recovery from cold symptoms when taken within 24 hours of the onset of symptoms. Also, the electrolytes are beneficial for reducing symptoms of dehydration, which is common when you're sick, says Jonathan Valdez, R.D.N., owner of Genki Nutrition and a spokesperson for the New York State Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics. But the rest of the ingredients don't play a role in immunity: "Beyond zinc and Vitamin C, there are no ingredients in Emergen-C that might influence sickness," he says.

Are there any downsides to taking Emergen-C?

The short answer is: It depends. It is possible to have too much vitamin C. The most common symptoms of overdose are cramping and GI distress. Valdez says that some people may experience these symptoms with as little as 500 mg (remember, Emergen-C has 1,000mg).

The only people who need to worry about more serious side effects are those affected by sickle cell anemia and G6PD deficiency. "Large doses of vitamin C can actually be life-threatening to those individuals," says Dr. Vojdani.

However, because Emergen-C contains far lower levels of all of the other vitamins and minerals, you won't overdose from one packet, or even from a few packets while you're sick, says Stephanie Long,



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M.D., F.A.A.F.D., a One Medical Provider. Because vitamin C is a water-soluble vitamin, you'll just pee out what your body can't absorb—which will give your urine a funny odor but is generally considered NBD.

"If you follow the dosage instructions and only take Emergen-C for a short period of time, there's very little risk of overdose," agrees Valdez.

The verdict: Can it actually help you *\*not\** get sick?

All three experts agree: If you want to boost your immunity, there are far better ways to do that than taking Emergen-C. (See: [5 Ways to Boost Your Immune System Without Medicine](#)) But they agree that getting your recommended daily intake of vitamin C and zinc is a smart preventive measure.

"I recommend meeting the recommendation for vitamin C from food," says Valdez. "If you're getting vitamin C through food in a balanced way, then that's even better because it has antioxidants that you may not otherwise obtain from supplements alone." ICYDK: Citrus, red peppers, green pepper, Brussels sprouts, kiwi fruit, cantaloupe, broccoli, and cauliflower are all good dietary sources of vitamin C. Seafood, yogurt, and cooked spinach are great sources of zinc.

If you opt for a vitamin C supplement, just don't consume more than the upper limit, which is 2,000mg per day, says Valdez. Dr. Vojdani recommends a vitamin C supplement in a form called liposomal, which he says allows for easier absorption into your bloodstream. Just remember: The FDA doesn't regulate supplements, so products with third-party seals from the USP, NSF, or Consumer Labs are best. (See: [Are Dietary Supplements Really Safe?](#))

And hey, you can always drink some OJ for old time's sake.

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